

METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR IMAGE PROCESSING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates to an image processing method and an image processing apparatus for automatically setting an image processing condition for an object included in an image.

Description of the Related Art

10 If the kind of image which is included in image information obtained by a digital camera or the like can be recognized, image classification, image search, or image processing can be carried out according to the type of an object included in an image.

15 For example, in the case of image classification or image search, an image search system has been proposed for judging similarity according to a physical characteristic included in an image. More specifically, a method of image classification and search is known wherein an area of an image is extracted
20 and compared with a reference image while being changed in size and position. Furthermore, based on the method described above, a method of efficiently carrying out image classification and image search is also known wherein a color histogram of an area extracted from an image is compared with a color histogram of
25 a reference image so that a position of an object in the image

is detected (The Transactions of The Institute of Electronics,
Information and Communication Engineers, Vol. J81-DII, No. 9,
pp. 2035-2042, 1998, for example). However, in any of the
above-described methods, similarity is recognized by the
5 physical characteristic. Therefore, two objects of different
types are judged to be similar in some cases, due to similarity
in the physical characteristic. Consequently, accuracy of the
search is not high.

In the case of image processing, a method of carrying out
10 image processing for high quality is known wherein different
image processing is carried out on a specific color area
recognized in an image (Japanese Patent Publication No.
5(1993)-62879, for example). This method enables removal of
noise by recognizing an area that tends to have a conspicuous
15 noise component, based on a color. However, since the area is
recognized from the color alone, skin may be confused with sand.
If an area of sand is mistaken as an area of skin and the noise
reduction is carried out on the area of sand, the texture of
the image may be ruined and the image may thus become unnatural.

20 In the case where image classification, image search, or
image processing is carried out based on information obtained
directly from an image, appropriate information cannot be
provided to a user. As a method of solving this problem, image
classification, image search, or image processing may be
25 carried out after recognizing the type of an object in an image.

If the type is recognized in advance, image classification and image search can be carried out according to the type that has been recognized, which leads to easy and accurate image classification and image search. In the case of image processing, image processing can be carried out by using an image processing condition in accordance with the object.

The types of objects included in an image need to be recognized by extracting object regions in the image and by recognizing the types for all the objects. For example, a user may extract an object region in an image and input the type thereof while viewing the image. However, it is a time-consuming operation for the user to extract information on the type.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention has been conceived based on consideration of the above circumstances. An object of the present invention is therefore to provide an image processing method and an image processing apparatus for automatically recognizing the type of an object included in an image.

An image processing method of the present invention is a method of recognizing the type of an object included in an image, and the image processing method comprises the steps of: generating object regions by dividing the image into objects and generating a plurality of block regions each having a predetermined number of pixels and being smaller than any one

of the object regions, by dividing the image;

recognizing the types of the respective block regions;

totaling up occurrence frequency of each of the types of
the respective block regions belonging to each of the object

5 regions; and

recognizing the type of each of the object regions based
on a result of the totaling.

An object refers to a subject included in an image, such
as a person, the sky, a sea, a tree, and a building. An object
10 region refers to an area in the image occupied by the subject.

Recognizing the type of an object refers to identifying
the type of an object in an image, such as "mountain", "sea",
"flower", and "sky". The type "unknown" is also used in the
case where the type is not known.

15 The image processing method of the present invention may
further comprise the steps of:

calculating a type reliability value representing
likelihood of each of the object regions being of the recognized
type:

20 setting an image processing condition for each of the
object regions by using the type reliability value and the type
thereof; and

carrying out image processing on each of the object
regions by using the image processing condition.

25 An image processing apparatus of the present invention

is an image processing apparatus for recognizing the type of an object included in an image, and the image processing apparatus comprises:

object region extraction means for generating object
5 regions by dividing the image into objects;

block region generation means for generating block regions each having a predetermined number of pixels and having a smaller area than any one of the object regions, by dividing the image into the block regions;

10 block region recognition means for recognizing the types of the respective block regions; and

object recognition means for recognizing the type of each of the objects by totaling up occurrence frequency of each of the types of the block regions in each of the object regions.

15 The block region recognition means refers to any means that can recognize the type of each of the block regions. For example, the block region recognition means may comprise:

block characteristic quantity extraction means for extracting block characteristic quantities from each of the
20 block regions;

mapping means for mapping the block characteristic quantities into a two-dimensional space; and

type output means having a type distribution map that defines the types at respective coordinates in the
25 two-dimensional space, and used for outputting the types

indicated by the type distribution map at coordinates of the block characteristic quantities mapped in the two-dimensional space as the types of the block regions.

The two-dimensional space may be a self-organizing map
5 wherein neurons having a learning ability are laid out in the form of a matrix.

The block characteristic quantity extraction means may extract a color component, a lightness component, and a structural component of each of the block regions as the block
10 characteristic quantities.

The object recognition means may have a function of calculating a type reliability value representing likelihood of each of the object regions being of the recognized type.

The image processing apparatus may further comprise:
15 processing condition setting means for setting an image processing condition for each of the object regions by using the type reliability value and the type thereof found by the object recognition means; and

image processing means for carrying out image processing
20 on each of the object regions by using the image processing condition set by the processing condition setting means.

The processing condition setting means can be any means that can set the image processing condition for each of the object regions in the image, and the processing condition
25 setting means may set the image processing condition by

calculating a processing efficiency coefficient that depends
on the type reliability value and by multiplying an initial
image processing condition set for each of the types of the
object regions by the processing efficiency coefficient that
5 has been calculated.

The object recognition means may recognize a category
representing whether each of the object regions is an artificial
object region comprising an artificial image or a natural object
region comprising a natural image. In this case, the object
10 recognition means may calculate a category reliability value
representing likelihood of each of the object regions belonging
to the category, in addition to the type reliability value.

The processing condition setting means may set the image
processing condition for each of the object regions by using
15 the type reliability value and the category reliability value,
in the case where the image comprises the artificial object
region and the natural object region.

The image processing means carries out the image
processing such as frequency processing and noise reduction
20 processing according to the image processing condition that has
been set. The image processing means may carry out no image
processing on the artificial object region.

According to the image processing method and the image
processing apparatus of the present invention, the type of each
25 of the objects can be recognized more accurately by using the

block regions for recognizing the types of the object regions than in the case of recognizing the object type based on each pixel, since a characteristic caused by image structure can be taken into consideration for judging the type of each of the object regions.

By recognizing the types of the respective block regions and by recognizing the type of each of the object regions after totaling the frequency of each of the types of the block regions therein, the type of each of the object regions can be automatically recognized with accuracy by absorbing a possible mistake in recognition in the types of some of the block regions therein.

If the block region recognition means comprises the block characteristic quantity extraction means, the mapping means, and the type output means having the type distribution map that defines the types at the respective coordinates in the two-dimensional space, the block characteristic quantities are extracted from each of the block regions and mapped into the two-dimensional space. The type output means then outputs the types of the block regions based on the coordinates in the two-dimensional space wherein the characteristics were mapped, with reference to the type distribution map. In this manner, the types of the block regions can be recognized efficiently with accuracy.

If the block characteristic quantity extraction means

extracts the color component, the lightness component, and the structural component as the block characteristic quantities, the types of the block regions can be recognized with more accuracy.

5 By detecting the type reliability value representing how likely it is that each of the object regions is of the recognized type, and by carrying out the image processing on each of the object regions by using the image processing condition that has been set according to the type and the type reliability value
10 of each of the object regions, the image processing in accordance with the types of the object regions can be carried out automatically, which improves image quality.

 If the object recognition means calculates not only the type reliability value but also the category reliability value
15 representing how likely it is that each of the object regions belongs to either the category of artificial object region or the category of natural object region, the image processing condition can be changed according to not only the type of each of the object regions but also the category thereof. Therefore,
20 image quality degradation due to automatic image processing on the object regions can be prevented.

 Furthermore, if the processing condition setting means can set the image processing condition for each of the object regions by using the type reliability value and the category
25 reliability value thereof in the case where the image includes

the artificial object region and the natural object region, an effect of the image processing on the artificial object region can be weakened regardless of possible misclassification of the artificial object region as the natural object region. In this manner, the effect of a change caused by the image processing can be reduced regarding the artificial object region that was generated according to an intention of a creator thereof.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a block diagram showing a configuration of a first embodiment of an image processing apparatus of the present invention;

Figures 2A to 2C show how the types of objects included in an image are recognized in the image processing apparatus;

Figure 3 is a block diagram showing an example of object region extraction means in the image processing apparatus shown in Figure 1;

Figures 4A and 4B show how the image is divided into object regions by the object region extraction means shown in Figure 3;

Figures 5A to 5C show how an object region is formed through integration of cluster regions by the object region extraction means;

Figure 6 is a block diagram showing an example of block characteristic quantity extraction means in the image processing apparatus;

Figure 7 shows how a distance image is generated by distance image generation means in the image processing apparatus;

Figure 8 shows an example of mapping means and type output means in the image processing apparatus;

Figures 9A to 9D show examples of type distribution maps used by the image processing apparatus;

Figure 10 is a flow chart showing preferable procedures of an image processing method of the present invention;

Figure 11 is a block diagram showing a configuration of a second embodiment of an image processing apparatus of the present invention;

Figure 12 is a block diagram showing a configuration of a third embodiment of an image processing apparatus of the present invention;

Figure 13 is a flow chart showing the operation of the image processing apparatus shown in Figure 12; and

Figure 14 is a block diagram showing another example of the mapping means.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Hereinafter, embodiments of an image processing apparatus of the present invention will be explained with reference to the accompanying drawings. Figure 1 is a block diagram showing an image processing apparatus of a first embodiment of the present invention. An image processing

apparatus 1 shown in Figure 1 is used for recognizing the types of objects included in an image P. The image processing apparatus 1 comprises block region generation means 10, object region extraction means 20, block region recognition means 30, and object recognition means 70.

The block region generation means 10 has a function of generating block regions BR by dividing the image P into pixels of a predetermined number, as shown in Figure 2A. The block region generation means 10 sends the block regions BR to the block region recognition means 30. For example, if the predetermined number of pixels is 32×32 , the image P is divided into the block regions BR each having 32×32 pixels.

The object region extraction means 20 has a function of generating object regions OR by dividing the image P into objects, as shown in Figure 2B. The object region extraction means 20 sends the object regions OR to the object recognition means 70.

The block region recognition means 30 has a function of recognizing the types of the block regions BR. More specifically, the block region recognition means 30 determines the types of the block regions in the image P as "mountain", "sea", "flower", and "sky", for example. The block region recognition means 30 sends information on the types of the block regions BR to the object recognition means 70.

The object recognition means 70 has a function of enabling

type recognition regarding the object regions OR by attaching type information (hereinafter referred to as type information KI) to each of the object regions OR, with use of the information on the types of the block regions. More specifically, the object recognition means 70 totals up frequency of each of the types of the block regions BR in each of the object regions OR. The object recognition means 70 then recognizes the type of each of the object regions OR as the type of the block regions BR observed most frequently therein. The object recognition means 70 does not use the block regions BR lying over two or more of the object regions for the totaling. Therefore, as shown in Figure 2C, each of the object regions OR has the information KI on the type thereof, and the object regions can be recognized by the type information KI.

The object recognition means 70 shown in Figure 1 determines the type of each of the object regions OR by the majority of the types of the block regions BR therein. However, the object recognition means 70 may have a function of outputting "unknown" as the type information KI if a proportion of the majority of the types (that is, the number of the majority type divided by the number of all the block regions BR in each of the object areas OR) is smaller than a threshold value. Alternatively, the object recognition means 70 may output "unknown" as the object type if a difference between the majority type and the second-largest type is small. This

function is used because it is more preferable in some cases for a user to have the information "unknown" rather than to have the information of erroneous object type.

The object region extraction means 20 comprises
5 characteristic quantity classification means 100, region
division means 101, smallest cluster region extraction means
112, integrated region judgment means 113, and region
integration means 110. The characteristic quantity
classification means 100 extracts a plurality of characteristic
10 quantities from pixels comprising the image P, and classifies
the pixels according to the characteristic quantities that are
similar to each other. The region division means 101 generates
cluster regions by dividing the image P according to the pixel
classification. The smallest cluster region extraction means
15 112 extracts a smallest cluster region having the smallest
number of pixels from the cluster regions. The integrated
region judgment means 113 extracts neighboring cluster regions
around the smallest cluster region. The region integration
means 110 extracts the object regions OR by integrating the
20 cluster regions.

Figures 4A and 4B and Figures 5A to 5C show how the image
P is divided into the object regions OR. The operation of the
object region extraction means 20 will be explained first with
reference to Figures 4A and 4B. Assume that the image P
25 comprises pixels having similar characteristics, as shown in

Figure 4A. The characteristic quantity classification means 100 extracts the characteristic quantities from the pixels, and generates characteristic vectors having the characteristic quantities as elements thereof. The characteristic vectors
5 are classified according to the similar characteristics (this process is called clustering), as shown in Figure 4B.

Thereafter, the region division means 101 maps a result of clustering into the actual image P. As shown in Figure 5A, the cluster regions comprising the similar pixels are then
10 generated, and stored as labeled images in a database 111.

How the regions are integrated will be explained next. The smallest cluster region extraction means 112 extracts the smallest cluster region from the cluster regions stored in the database 111. The integrated region judgment means 113 then
15 extracts the neighboring cluster regions.

In the case where the number of the pixels in the smallest cluster region is equal to or less than a predetermined minute-image threshold value (such as 1/100 of the total number of pixels in the image P), the integrated region judgment means
20 113 integrates the smallest cluster region with the neighboring cluster region having the largest number of border pixels (the largest border length). More specifically, as shown in Figure 5A, assume that one of the cluster regions A is the smallest cluster region wherein the number of the pixels is equal to or
25 less than the minute-image threshold value. Since the cluster

region A has borders with cluster regions C and D, the cluster regions C and D are the neighboring cluster regions.

The integrated region judgment means 113 calculates the number of pixels in the borders between the smallest cluster region and the cluster regions C and D. In Figure 5A, the number of pixels in the border with the cluster region D is larger than the number of pixels in the border with the cluster region C. Therefore, the cluster region A is integrated with the cluster region D, as shown in Figure 5B.

10 In the case where the number of the pixels in the smallest cluster region is smaller than a predetermined small-image threshold value (such as 1/10 of the total number of the pixels in the image P), the region integration means 110 integrates the smallest cluster region with a neighboring one of the cluster regions that is close to the smallest cluster region in a characteristic space. More specifically, assume that a cluster region B in Figure 5B is the smallest cluster region wherein the number of pixels is smaller than the predetermined small-image threshold value. The cluster regions C and D are the neighboring cluster regions. If distance is used as a reference, a judgment is made as to which of the cluster regions C or D has a texture similar to that of the cluster region B. The cluster region B is integrated with the cluster region D having the shortest distance in the characteristic space, as shown in Figure 5C.

The region integration means 110 repeats the above-described procedures until the number of pixels in the smallest cluster region extracted by the smallest cluster extraction means 112 becomes larger than the predetermined small-image threshold value, and the image P is divided into the object regions OR, as shown in Figure 2C.

The block region recognition means 30 will be explained next with reference to Figure 1. The block region recognition means 30 has characteristic quantity extraction means 40, mapping means 50, and type output means 60. The characteristic quantity extraction means 40 has a function of extracting block characteristic quantities BCQ from each of the block regions BR. The mapping means 50 has a two-dimensional SOM (Self-Organizing Map), and maps the block characteristic quantities BCQ (multi-dimensional characteristic quantities) into the two-dimensional SOM. The type output means 60 has type distribution maps KDM that define the type of each of positions in the two-dimensional SOM. The type output means 60 outputs the type of each of the block regions BR by using the type distribution maps KDM with reference to coordinate information CI in the two-dimensional SOM mapped by the mapping means 50. Hereinafter, a configuration of the block region recognition means 30 will be explained in detail.

Figure 6 is a block diagram showing an example of the characteristic quantity extraction means 40. The

characteristic quantity extraction means 40 outputs 15 of the
block characteristic quantities BCQ comprising a color
component, a lightness component, and a structural component.
The characteristic quantity extraction means 40 comprises Lab
5 conversion means 41, average calculation means 42, first
wavelet conversion means 43, distance image generation means
46, and second wavelet conversion means 47.

The Lab conversion means 41 has a function of converting
the block regions BR comprising RGB images into Lab images. The
10 average calculation means 42 has a function of calculating
averages L-ave, a-ave, and b-ave of L, a, and b components of
each of the Lab-converted block regions. The averages L-ave,
a-ave, and b-ave comprise the block characteristic quantities
BCQ regarding the color component.

15 The first wavelet conversion means 43 carries out wavelet
conversion on the Lab-converted block regions and calculates
high frequency components L-LH, L-HL, and L-HH of the lightness
component. The first wavelet conversion means 43 is connected
to average calculation means 44 and maximum calculation means
20 45.

The average calculation means 44 calculates averages
L-LH-ave, L-HL-ave, and L-HH-ave of the high frequency
components L-LH, L-HL, and L-HH of the lightness component
calculated by the first wavelet conversion means 43. The
25 averages denoted as L-LH-ave, L-HL-ave, and L-HH-ave are the

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block characteristic quantities BCQ regarding the lightness component.

The maximum calculation means 45 calculates top-5% values included in frequency distribution of the high frequency components L-LH, L-HL, and L-HH. The calculated values, hereinafter referred to as L-LH-max, L-HL-max, and L-HH-max, are the block characteristic quantities BCQ regarding the lightness component.

By using the averages and the maxima as the block characteristic quantities of the L component, one of the block regions BR wherein the high frequency component having certain intensity is observed uniformly can be distinguished from another one of the block regions BR wherein the high frequency component having the certain intensity is observed only in a limited area. In this manner, the type of each of the block regions BR can be recognized with accuracy.

The distance image generation means 46 has a function of generating a distance image D from the Lab-converted block regions. The distance image D is different from a general distance image, and is generated by visualizing a Euclidean distance between each of the Lab-converted block regions having 3 variables and a blurred image comprising a low frequency component generated at the time of the wavelet conversion, as shown in Figure 7. In other words, the three-dimensional distance image in a Lab space is an image generated by

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visualization of how a signal changes in a uniform color space,
and can be explained as an image representing a change perceived
by human vision. By dealing with the change in the
three-dimensional space, a structural characteristic of the
5 image that cannot be extracted from a lightness image can be
extracted, and the type recognition can be carried out more
accurately.

More specifically, if the type of each of the block regions
BR is recognized based on the characteristic quantities
10 extracted from the pixels, the type cannot be recognized
according to an image structure. Therefore, types such as "sky"
and "sea" having similar lightness and color but different image
structure cannot be distinguished accurately. On the other
hand, by carrying out type recognition according to the image
15 structure from which the distance image D is generated for each
of the block regions BR, the type can be recognized accurately.

The second wavelet conversion means 47 carries out
wavelet conversion on the distance image D, and outputs high
frequency components D-LH, D-HL, and D-HH. The second wavelet
20 conversion means 47 is connected to average calculation means
48 and maximum calculation means 49.

The average calculation means 48 calculates averages
D-LH-ave, D-HL-ave, and D-HH-ave of the high frequency
components D-LH, D-HL, and D-HH calculated by the second wavelet
25 conversion means 47. The averages denoted as D-LH-ave,

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D-HL-ave, and D-HH-ave are the block characteristic quantities
BCQ regarding the structural component.

The maximum calculation means 49 calculates top-5% values
included in frequency distribution of the high frequency
5 components D-LH, D-HL, and D-HH. The calculated values,
hereinafter referred to as D-LH-max, D-HL-max, and D-HH-max,
are the block characteristic quantities BCQ regarding the
structural component.

By using the averages and the maxima as the block
10 characteristic quantities of the D (distance) component, one
of the block regions BR wherein the high frequency component
having certain intensity is observed uniformly can be
distinguished from another one of the block regions BR wherein
the high frequency component having the certain intensity is
15 observed only in a limited area. In this manner, the type of
each of the block regions BR can be recognized with accuracy.

Figure 8 shows an example of the mapping means 50 and the
type output means 60. The mapping means 50 and the type output
means 60 will be explained with reference to Figures 1 and 8.
20 In the mapping means 50 and the type output means 60 are used
a counter-propagation network using the self-organizing map
(see "Application of Self-Organizing Map: Two-Dimensional
Visualization of Multi-Dimensional Information" written by
Tokudaka, Kishida, and Fujimura and published by Kaibundo in
25 1999).

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The mapping means 50 has the two-dimensional SOM comprising the self-organizing map wherein neurons N are laid out in the form of a matrix, and has a function of mapping the characteristic quantities (multi-dimensional characteristic quantities) into the two-dimensional SOM. Each of the neurons N has vector coordinates in the same dimension as the block characteristic quantities BCQ. In this embodiment, the block characteristic quantities BCQ comprise the 15 block characteristic quantities, and each of the neurons N thus comprises 15-dimensional connection weight vector.

The mapping means 50 selects a neuron N_i (an ignition element) having the closest fit to the 15 block characteristic quantities in each of the block regions BR (that is, the neuron that is closest in terms of the Euclidean distance, for example) from the neurons N in the self-organizing map SOM. In this manner, the multi-dimensional space comprising the 15 block characteristic quantities is mapped into the two-dimensional SOM. The mapping means 50 sends the coordinate information CI of the selected neuron N_i to the type output means 60.

The type output means 60 has the type distribution maps KDM having the same coordinate system as the two-dimensional SOM. The type output means 60 outputs type information KI indicated by positions represented by the coordinate information CI in one of the type distribution maps KDM, according to the coordinate information CI in the

two-dimensional SOM mapped by the mapping means 50. As shown in Figure 9, the type distribution maps KDM show distribution patterns of the coordinate information CI in the two-dimensional space for the respective types of the objects, that is, for the respective types represented by the type information KI. For example, if the type information KI is "sky", distribution of the positions corresponding to the coordinate information CI is concentrated in the right and upper left of the distribution map KDM, as shown by Figure 9A. Likewise, Figures 9B to 9D respectively represent the type distribution maps KDM for the type information KI of "building", "tree", and "sea".

In this example, the case is explained where the type distribution maps KDM are available for the respective types represented by the type information KI. However, the distribution patterns for the types represented by the type information KI may be shown on only one type distribution map KDM.

The self-organizing map SOM and the type distribution maps KDM used in extraction of the type information KI (that is, used in recognition mode) have been trained in advance. In other words, the two-dimensional SOM and the type distribution maps are capable of learning, and each of the neurons N and the type distribution maps KDM are trained by using input data for learning (hereinafter referred to as training data) comprising

the block characteristic quantities BCQ extracted from block regions whose type information KI has been known.

More specifically, each of the neurons N in the self-organizing map SOM has a random connection weight vector in an initial state. When the training data having the known type information KI are input to the mapping means 50, the mapping means 50 selects the neuron N_i (the ignition element) which is the closest fit to the input data. At the same time, a portion of the neurons N surrounding the selected neuron N_i , such as 3×3 neurons N , is also selected. The connection weight vectors of the neurons N and N_i are updated to become similar to the training data, and the neurons N in the self-organizing map SOM are trained in this manner.

The process described above is carried out by using several sets of the training data. The training data are repeatedly input to the self-organizing map SOM several times. As the input of the training data is repeated, an area of the neurons N whose connection weight vectors are updated narrows, and the connection weight vector of only the selected neuron N_i is eventually updated.

How the type distribution maps KDM are trained will be explained next. In an initial state, a value at each position in the type distribution maps KDM is set to 0. When the training data are mapped into the two-dimensional SOM as has been described above, the coordinate information CI in the

self-organizing map SOM is input. In response to the output of the coordinate information CI, a natural number (such as 1) is added to the values at the position represented by the coordinate information CI and the surrounding positions (such as 3×3) in one of the type distribution maps KDM corresponding to the type of the training data.

The more the training data are input, the values of a specific area in the type distribution map KDM corresponding to the type of the training data increase by the addition. This is because the block characteristic quantities are often mapped in the specific area in the self-organizing map SOM, since the block characteristic quantities of the block regions BR of the same type are similar. Therefore, the values in the specific area increase in the type distribution map KDM.

The values at all the positions in the type distribution map KDM are divided by a product of the number of the training data (training vectors) and the number of training repetition, and the type distribution map KDM is generated wherein a probability from 0.0 to 1.0 is represented at each of the positions therein. The larger the probability is, the more likely the object belongs to the type. In the type distribution maps KDM in Figure 9, a white area represents an area having a reliability value (that is, the probability) of 0.8 to 1.0, while a gray area represents the reliability value of 0.2 to 0.8. A black area represents the reliability value of 0.0 to

0.2. In this manner, the type distribution maps KDM are generated for the respective types represented by the type information KI.

At the time of recognizing the type of each of the actual
5 block regions BR (that is, in a recognition mode), the type
output means 60 extracts the reliability value at the position
represented by the coordinate information CI from the plurality
of type distribution maps KDM. More specifically, when the
mapping means 50 sends the coordinate information CI, the type
10 output means 60 extracts the reliability value at the position
corresponding to the coordinate information CI, from each of
the type distribution maps for "sky", "building", "tree", and
"sea", for example. The type output means 60 then generates
a classification vector having the probabilities of the type
15 distribution maps KDM as components thereof. In this case, the
classification vector having the components of the
reliabilities of "sky", "building", "tree", and "sea" is
generated. The type output means 60 then judges the type
information KI having the largest probability as the type
20 information KI of the corresponding block region BR, and sends
the type information KI to the object recognition means 70.

In the type recognition means 60, in the case where the
vector component having the largest probability value in the
classification vector is smaller than a predetermined threshold
25 value, the reliability value of recognition of the type for the

corresponding block region BR may be judged to be low. In this case, the type information KI representing "unknown" is sent to the object recognition means 70. Alternatively, the type information KI representing "unknown" may be sent to the object
5 recognition means 70 in the case where a difference between the largest vector component and the second-largest vector component is small and thus the reliability value of recognition of the type is judged to be low. In this manner, for the block region BR whose reliability value is low regarding the type
10 recognition thereof, an effect of the block region BR can be reduced in recognizing the kind of the object region OR including the block region BR. Consequently, accuracy of the object recognition can be improved.

When the mapping mean 50 maps the block characteristic
15 quantities BCQ into the self-organizing map SOM, if the distance (Euclidean distance, for example) between the most similar neuron Ni (the ignition element) and the mapped point representing the block characteristic quantities BCQ is larger than a predetermined threshold value, the mapping means 50 may
20 send to the type output means 60 information representing the fact that no matching processing is carried out. In this case, the type output means sends the type information KI representing "unknown" to the object recognition means 70. In this manner, for the block region BR whose reliability value is low regarding
25 the type information KI thereof, an effect of the block region

BR can also be reduced in recognizing the type of the object region OR. Consequently, accuracy of the object recognition can be improved.

Figure 10 is a flow chart showing procedures of an image processing method of the present invention, and how the image processing is carried out will be explained with reference to Figures 1 to 10. The object region extraction means 20 generates the object regions OR by dividing the image P into the object regions OR. The block region generation means 10 also generates the block regions BR each having the predetermined number of pixels (such as 32×32 pixels) and a smaller area than any one of the object regions OR, by dividing the image P (Step ST1).

The block characteristic quantity extraction means 40 extracts the 15 block characteristic quantities BCQ from each of the block regions BR (Step ST2). Thereafter, the mapping means 50 maps the extracted characteristic quantities BCQ into the self-organizing map SOM, and the coordinate information CI in the self-organizing map SOM is sent to the type output means 60 (Step ST3). The type output means 60 extracts the type information KI regarding the coordinate information CI by using the type distribution maps KDM, and sends the type information KI to the object recognition means 70 (Step ST4). The above-described process is repeated for all the block regions BR (Step S5).

The object recognition means 70 totals up the types represented by the type information KI regarding the block regions BR (Step ST6), and outputs the type observed most frequently as the type information KI of the corresponding
5 object region OR (Step ST7).

In the above embodiment, the type information KI is extracted for each of the block regions BR, and occurrence frequency of the types represented by the type information KI is counted for each of the block regions BR for recognizing the
10 type of the corresponding object region OR. In this manner, the type of the object can be automatically recognized. In some cases, the block region recognition means 30 may extract the type information KI that is different from the true type information of the corresponding object region OR regarding
15 some of the block regions BR. For example, if the object is actually "sea", some of the block regions BR therein may be recognized as "sky". In this case, since the most frequently observed type is used as the type information of the corresponding object region OR, the type information
20 representing the different type caused by misclassification can be prevented from being attached as the type information KI of the corresponding object even if some of the block regions BR therein have been attached with the type information KI that is different from the true type information. Therefore, the
25 type information KI can be recognized automatically and

accurately regarding each of the object areas OR.

As has been described above, the color component, the lightness component, and the structural component are extracted as the characteristic quantities BCQ of each of the block regions BR, and the block characteristic quantities BCQ are
5 input to the counter propagation network. In this manner, the type information KI of the block regions BR can be recognized. In the case where the characteristic quantities are extracted from the pixels for inferring the type information KI, the type
10 information KI cannot be recognized accurately, because the characteristic quantities extracted from the pixels of the image do not include distance information (image information). Therefore, only the lightness information or the color information can be extracted. Since the color of "sky" and
15 "sea" may be the same, an object of "sea" may be recognized as an object of "sky".

On the other hand, if the block characteristic quantities BCQ are extracted for each of the block regions BR and the type information KI is output based on the block characteristic
20 quantities BCQ, objects having the similar color information or lightness information such as "sky" and "sea" can be distinguished from each other, and the type information KI is also recognized with accuracy.

Figure 11 is a block diagram showing a second embodiment
25 of an image processing apparatus of the present invention, and

an image processing apparatus 200 will be explained with reference to Figure 11. In the image processing apparatus 200, the same elements as in the first embodiment have the same reference numbers and detailed explanations thereof will be omitted.

The image processing apparatus 200 in Figure 11 extracts the object regions OR and then divides the object region OR into the block regions BR.

More specifically, the image processing apparatus 200 in Figure 11 comprises block region generation means 201, the object region extraction means 20, the block region recognition means 30, and the object recognition means 70. The object region extraction means 20 divides an image into the object regions OR, and each of the object regions OR is divided by the block region generation means 201. The block region recognition means 30 recognizes the type of each of the block regions BR in each of the object regions OR, and the object recognition means 70 takes the sum thereof. In this manner, the type of each of the objects can be recognized, and the image processing apparatus 200 has the same effect as the image processing apparatus 1 shown in Figure 1.

An image processing apparatus of a third embodiment of the present invention will be explained with reference to Figure 12. Figure 12 is a block diagram showing the third embodiment. In an image processing apparatus 300 in Figure 12, the same

elements as in the first embodiment have the same reference numbers, and detailed explanations thereof will be omitted.

The image processing apparatus 300 in Figure 12 changes an image processing condition in accordance with the type of each of the object regions OR. More specifically, the image processing apparatus 300 further comprises processing condition setting means 80 for setting an image processing condition OP for each of the object regions OR by using the type of the object and a reliability value thereof that are found by the object recognition means 70, and image processing means 90 for carrying out image processing on each of the object regions OR by using the image processing condition that has been set by the processing condition setting means. The object recognition means 70 calculates the reliability value representing likelihood of each of the object regions OR being actually of the recognized type.

The object recognition means 70 has the function of calculating the reliability value (hereinafter referred to as the type reliability value KR) as a share of the occurrence frequency of the determined type. More specifically, the object recognition means 70 calculates the type reliability value KR ($0 \leq KR \leq 1$) by dividing the number of the block regions BR belonging to the same type as the corresponding object region OR by the total number of the block regions BR comprising the object region OR. The object recognition means 70 then sends

the type reliability value KR and the type information KI to the processing condition setting means 80.

The operation of the processing condition setting means 80 will be explained next with reference to Figure 12. The processing condition setting means 80 sets the image processing condition OP for each of the object regions OR by using the type information KI and the type reliability value KR sent from the object recognition means 70. More specifically, the processing condition setting means 80 has an initial image processing condition OPref set for each of the types of the object regions OR, and the processing condition setting means 80 extracts one of the initial image processing conditions OPref in accordance with the type represented by the type information KI.

The processing condition setting means 80 multiplies the initial image processing condition OPref by a processing efficiency coefficient reflecting the type reliability value KR, and sets the image processing condition OP for the corresponding object region OR. For example, if the type of one of the object regions is "sky" or "skin", in order to reduce noise, the processing condition setting means 80 calculates a high frequency gain $G_h = OPref \times (1 - KR \times 0.5)$, and uses the high frequency gain Gh as the image processing condition OP. If one of the object regions OR belongs to the type "building", in order to enhance sharpness, the processing condition setting means

80 calculates the high frequency gain $G_h = O_{Pref} \times (1 + K_R \times 0.5)$,
and uses the high frequency gain G_h as the image processing
condition OP . In the case where the type of one of the object
regions OR is "unknown", the processing condition setting means
5 80 sets the initial image processing condition O_{Pref} as the
image processing condition OP .

As has been described above, in the case where the type
reliability value K_R is low, the image processing condition that
is closer to the initial image processing condition O_{Pref} is
10 used as the image processing condition OP . In other words, if
the type reliability value is low, the effect of noise reduction
can be prevented from being too extreme.

The image processing means 90 carries out the image
processing on each of the object regions OR by using the image
15 processing condition OP set by the processing condition setting
means 80. More specifically, in the case where the high
frequency gain G_h has been set as the image processing condition
 OP , the image processing means 90 carries out the image
processing so as to satisfy:

20 the image P after the image processing = $I_L + G_h \times I_H$
wherein L and H refer to a low frequency component and a high
frequency component, respectively.

Figure 13 is a flow chart showing procedures of an image
processing method of the present invention described above.
25 The object region extraction means 20 divides the image P into

the object regions OR (Step ST10), and the object recognition means 70 attaches the type information KI to each of the object regions OR according to the method described as Step ST1 to Step ST7 (Step ST11). The object recognition means 70 also
5 calculates the type reliability value KR, and inputs the type information KI and the type reliability value KR to the processing condition setting means 80.

The processing condition setting means 80 generates the image processing condition OP for each of the object regions
10 OR (Step ST12). Thereafter, the image processing means 90 carries out the image processing by using the image processing condition OP reflecting the type of each of the object regions OR (Step ST13).

As has been described above, according to the third
15 embodiment, the object regions OR are extracted from the image P, and the type information KI as well as the type reliability value KR are found for each of the object regions OR. By using the type information KI and the type reliability value KR, the image processing condition OP is set, and the image processing
20 is carried out according to the image processing condition OP on each of the object regions OR. In this manner, the image processing can be carried out in accordance with the type of each of the object regions OR, which leads to image quality improvement. In the case where the image processing condition
25 OP is set according to physical characteristics such as color

and texture of the image P, object regions OR of different kinds but having similar physical characteristics, such as "sand" and "skin" are processed according to the same image processing condition. Therefore, the image processing may generate a
5 result that is not preferable for some of the object regions.

On the other hand, according to the method of the present invention, by setting the image processing condition OP based on a characteristic of an image of the type of each of the object regions OR, image quality improvement can be achieved.
10 Furthermore, by setting the image processing condition OP by using both the type information KI and the type reliability value KR, an effect of the image processing can be enhanced or weakened according to the type reliability value KR. Therefore, even in the case where the type is erroneously detected, image
15 quality degradation due to the image processing can be minimal.

In the explanation of the processing condition setting means 80 in Figure 12, the high frequency gain Gh is used as the image processing condition OP. However, the type reliability value KR may be set according to a histogram for
20 gradation processing or a parameter such as density.

The object recognition means 70 in Figure 12 detects both the type reliability value KR and the type information KI. However, in addition to the type information KI, the object recognition means 70 may recognize a category of each of the
25 object regions OR for distinguishing an object region ORa of

an "artificial image" from an object region OR_n of a "natural image". The object recognition means 70 then sends information on the category to the processing condition setting means 80. The object recognition means 70 has classified the types
5 represented by the type information KI into a natural image category or an artificial image category in advance. More specifically, the object recognition means 70 groups the type information KI representing "sky", "tree", and "building" into the natural image category, and the type information KI
10 representing "characters" and "frame" into the artificial image category.

The object recognition means 70 also has a function of calculating a category reliability value CR representing a reliability value of the category being true. The category
15 reliability value CR is calculated according to the same procedures described above for the type reliability value KR. The processing condition setting means 80 sets the image processing condition OP by using the type reliability value KR and the category reliability value CR of each of the object
20 regions OR.

More specifically, in the case where one of the object regions OR has been judged to be of the type "sky" or "skin", in order to reduce noise, the processing condition setting means 80 calculates the high frequency gain Gh according to an
25 equation $G_h = O_{Pref} \times (1 - K_R \times C_R \times 0.5)$, and uses the high

frequency gain G_h as the image processing condition OP . In other words, the effect of image processing on the corresponding object region OR is awakened by the category reliability value CR .

5 For example, in the case where the image processing has been carried out on the artificial object region OR_a by mistaking the object region as the natural object region OR_n , the object may not reflect an intension of a person who generated the artificial image. In order to solve this problem, the image
10 processing condition OP is set to become dependent on the category reliability value CR . Consequently, even in the case where the artificial object region OR_a is mistaken as the natural object region OR_n , the image processing on the artificial object region OR_a can be weakened. In this manner,
15 a side effect of the image processing can be reduced.

The image processing means 90 in Figure 12 may carry out no image processing on the artificial object region OR_a . In this manner, the image processing can be prevented from being carried out on the artificial object region OR_a .

20 Although the preferred embodiments of the present invention have been explained above, the image processing apparatus of the present invention is not limited to the embodiments described above. For example, the mapping means
50 shown in Figure 8 has only one self-organizing map SOM .
25 However, the mapping means 50 may have two self-organizing maps,

“ ”
“ ”

as shown in Figure 14. More specifically, mapping means 150
in Figure 14 has a first self-organizing map SOM1 and a second
self-organizing map SOM2. The mapping means 150 also comprises
first mapping means 151 and second mapping means 152. The first
5 mapping means maps the block characteristic quantities BCQ into
the first self-organizing map SOM1, and outputs first
coordinate information CI1 to the second mapping means 152. The
second mapping means 152 receives the first coordinate
information CI1 in the first self-organizing map SOM1 from the
10 first mapping means 151 for each of the block regions BR, and
maps the first coordinate information CI1 into the second
self-organizing map SOM2.

The first mapping means 151 and the first self-organizing
map SOM1 have the same structure as the mapping means 50 and
15 the self-organizing map SOM. The second mapping means 152 maps
the first coordinate information CI1 output from the first
mapping means 151 into the second self-organizing map SOM2 for
the block regions BR having a specific special relation, such
as a 3×3 neighboring block regions, for example. In this
20 manner, upon recognition of the type to be represented by the
type information KI regarding the block regions BR, the type
can be recognized by using a wider-area characteristic caused
by the image structure of the block regions BR. Therefore,
accuracy of recognition can be improved. Furthermore, the type
25 can also be recognized by using a wider structure if SOMs having

more steps are used instead of the two-step SOMs described above.

The block region recognition means 30 in Figure 1 sends the type information KI such as "sky" and "sea" to the object
5 recognition means 70. However, the classification vector itself may be sent as the type information KI to the object recognition means 70. In this case, the object recognition means 70 simply adds the classification vector of each of the block regions BR in each of the object regions OR, and recognizes
10 the largest vector component in the resulting classification vector as the type information KI of the corresponding object region OR. Alternatively, in the case where the largest vector component is smaller than a predetermined threshold value, the object recognition means 70 may determine the kind as "unknown"
15 regarding the corresponding object region OR.

At the time of generation of the object regions OR and the block regions BR, resolution of the image P is used as it is, in the above example. However, the resolution may be lowered before input of the image P to the object region
20 extraction means 20 and the block region generation means 10. By lowering the resolution, an amount of data to be processed can be reduced, which leads to higher processing speed and efficient processing.

Furthermore, the resolution at the time of generating the
25 object regions OR and the resolution at the time of generating

the block regions BR are not necessarily the same. For example, the resolution of the block regions BR may be higher than that of the object regions OR. This is because the object regions OR are generated for roughly dividing the image P into the objects while the block regions BR are generated for extracting the type information KI thereof, as has been described above. Therefore, the purpose of classifying the image can be achieved even if a comparatively low-resolution image is used for the object regions.

In Figure 1, the block regions BR generated by the block region generation means 10 are sent to the block region recognition means 30. However, the block regions may be sent to the block region recognition means 30 after being subjected to smoothing processing such as morphology processing or closing operation thereon. In this manner, an isolated noise component included in each of the block regions BR can be eliminated, and accuracy of type recognition can be improved.

The image processing apparatus 1 in Figure 1 may be configured by hardware or as a combination of an object recognition program and a computer. The object recognition program is a program for causing the computer to recognize the type of an object included in an image. The program causes the computer to have object region extraction means for generating object regions by dividing the image, block region generation means generating block regions by dividing the image into the

block regions each having a predetermined number of pixels and smaller than any one of the object regions, block region recognition means for recognizing the types of the block regions, and object recognition means for totaling up occurrence
5 frequency of the types of the block regions for each of the object regions and for recognizing the type of the object by using a result of the totaling.